How the Myth of a Sacrificed Princess Bewitched Printmaker Belkis Ayón

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‘They said it was a secret society, only for men, and that aroused my interest’, explained Cuban artist Belkis Ayón in 1997 of Abakuá, an all-male secret society brought to Cuba in the 19th century by slaves from Nigeria, and which served as boundless inspiration for her art. Ayón, who committed suicide in 1999 at the age of 32, her career on the rise in Cuba and internationally, left behind a striking body of work on the subject. A virtuosic printmaker, her favoured technique was collography, a labor-intensive process that involves collaging materials onto a cardboard matrix, producing a variety of textures. Her multi-part images included up to 18 individual prints composing nearly mural-sized scenes. Around 1990, she limited her palette to a velvety range of blacks, whites and greys.

At the heart of Ayón’s work is the princess Sikán, the only woman in Abakuá lore, who was put to death for revealing the religion’s secrets to her fiancée, a prince in an enemy nation. Ayón perceived Sikán as a kind of alter ego. The twinned identities of artist and subject form the basis of ‘Nkame’, the artist’s first US museum retrospective at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art. Curated by Cristina Vives, the exhibition (whose name comes from the Abakuá word for ‘greeting’ and ‘praise’) presents 48 of Ayón’s works, accompanied by a video in which the artist demonstrates her print process and discusses her subject matter.

Belkis Ayón, *Sin Título (La soga y el fuego)*, collograph, 1996. Courtesy: The Belkis Ayón Estate and Landau Traveling Exhibitions

The exhibition opens with a grouping of colour lithographs Ayón made while a student at Havana's Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA). Abakuá symbols appear among those of other African societies. In *Veneration* (ca. 1986), for instance, figures in leopard print bow down before a fish, referencing West African 'leopard societies' and the sacred fish, Tanzé, at the centre of Abakuá's origin story.

It was when Ayón eliminated colour from her work that she began to focus exclusively on Abakuá and Sikán. Portraits and scenes tracing Sikán's path from life to death and eternity transgress the traditional narrative of fraternity and female betrayal to privilege the woman's perspective. The six-panel print *The Supper* (1991) is one of several images interweaving Abakuá and Christian symbolism: the work references both the Abakuá initiation banquet and the Last Supper, replacing the central figure of Jesus with a stark white Sikán, flanked by several black and grey women. The black and white bodies signify not race but life and death, respectively, in Abakuá mythology.

Belkis Ayón, *Mokongo*, Collograph, 1991. Courtesy: Collection of the Belkis Ayón Estate

The prints' textures and austere tones create an otherworldly atmosphere, heightened by the stylized figures, with no facial features except wide, almost extra-terrestrial eyes. In the haunting *Sikán with Goat* (1993), a pregnant Sikán faces away from the viewer, peering over her shoulder. Against her jet-black face, her gaze is arresting, at once uncanny and deeply intimate.

Ayón's compositions grew increasingly complex in the early and mid-1990s, as she shifted from portraits to scenes and conceived theatrical display methods that would bring the work off the wall. The lower half of the monumental 18-panel *To Make You Love Me Forever* (1991) – Ayón's contribution to the 1993 Venice Biennale, depicting the earthly and celestial realms – juts out from the wall diagonally. In the *Consecration* series (1991), multi-part prints are mounted on screens and installed in the middle of the exhibition's second gallery. Representing an Abakuá ceremony in three 'scenes', the prints' arched shapes recall a theatre's proscenium, the figures frozen in tableaux.

Belkis Ayón, *¡¡Déjame salir!!*, collograph, 1997. Courtesy: Collection of the Belkis Ayón Estate

The breadth of Ayón's themes – love, betrayal, grief, devotion, self-sacrifice – and the sheer power of her imagery suggest more is at stake than an artist's curiosity about a secret society. While gender is underplayed in her minimally rendered bodies, it is conspicuous in the uneven balances of power she allegorizes. Yet Ayón seemed more interested in the range of emotional and psychological states offered by the Abakuá narrative than its socio-

political implications. The final works in ‘Nkame’, from the last two years of her life, move away from Abakuá and the large-scale format. A series of circular prints with female figures at their centre ends the exhibition on a distressing note. In *Harassment* (1998), a figure is subsumed in a spiralling maelstrom, while in the harrowing *Let Me Out!!* (1997), a woman appears trapped in flame-like fronds. Sikán’s resolve in the face of death is here replaced by claustrophobic fear and anguish. For the artist who identified with the sacrificed princess, these images reveal a realm more personal, more intense than Abakuá’s. They collapse myth and reality, and lay bare the cost, for these creators, of giving themselves to the creation.

‘NKAME: A Retrospective of Cuban Printmaker Belkis Ayón (1967-1999)’ runs at Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Arizona, until 20 January 2019

Main image: Belkis Ayón, Nlloro*, Collograph, 1991. Courtesy: The Belkis Ayón Estate and Landau Traveling Exhibitions*